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Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-36935-0 - Children, Parents and Politics
Edited by Geoffrey Scarre
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Part I

What Children Are

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Children in History: Concepts of Nature and Society

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Introduction

Children have recently become news. Child abuse, incest, and murder frequently occupy the headlines. Television and radio programmes are regularly devoted to these subjects. This media attention contains a drama and a voyeurism of which we should be properly sceptical. Furthermore, it may serve to confirm a sense of complacency among 'normal' parents – they are not the abusers in question. Present-day reactions to the ill-treatment of children are certainly complex enough without the additional problem of history. By this I mean that implicit historical claims are often contained in media presentations and in received opinion. Currently there is an immediate sense of crisis about the treatment of children, despite a recognition that any visible increases in child abuse may be in the reporting rather than in the occurrence itself. Readers, viewers, and listeners easily feel a sense of urgency, mixed with fear at the magnitude of contemporary ills, when they learn of damaged children. Many treatments of the subject advance a covert historical thesis which is highly morally charged. Our perceptions of contemporary issues are clearly moulded by such an unspoken historical consciousness, within which the past is often idealised and the present depicted as a decline. Of course, our implicit historical sense can go in the opposite direction morally speaking, as it does in relation to child labour. When the work of the young is considered, the past becomes barbaric and exploitative, the present enlightened by the discovery of the importance of play, which thereby becomes the antithesis of work. Because we so often construct and deploy historical myths to organise contemporary tensions, it is important to assess what kind of historical knowledge is possible about children.

We might put this same point in another way. It is common to find

I would like to thank Meg Arnot, Karl Figlio and, above all, Geoffrey Scarre for their generous help.

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the dichotomy traditional/modern used in connection with current social ills, including those where children are at issue.[1] For many people, the abuse of children symbolises the negative aspects of modern life. We can easily see how widespread the identification between children and social well-being is from the prevalent use by politicians of phrases like 'our children's future', which raise questions about the present and the future in deliberately emotive terms. As a result, there is little commitment to thinking logically about children's social position, partly for the understandable reason that we are all deeply implicated, emotionally, in child welfare. Yet, until we face up to this problem, discussions of children will continue to be muddled in ways that are seldom apparent.

I want to suggest that children pose special intellectual challenges to us. This is partly because the state of being a child is temporary and hard to define. Indeed, the process of becoming an adult involves a number of fundamental shifts which, certainly from an adult perspective and probably also from a child's, are so dramatic that a gradualist language modelled on small-scale, incremental growth seems hopelessly inadequate. There are two issues, to which we shall return, which focus the problem with particular force – work and sex.

Historical writing participates in the construction of our ideas of childhood. The history of childhood has been used as a way of speaking about other social transformations, precisely because it can so easily be taken to symbolise them. Discussions about children and childhood, past or present, are suffused with moral assumptions. Furthermore, we often use such discourses as a way of speaking about other concerns. I also wish to suggest that using a language which refers to children in terms of nature, as I believe we have done for almost three centuries, is profoundly problematic. A general commitment to speaking of children in a language permeated by natural imagery (tender, pure, innocent, plantlike) and to thinking about them as asocial or presocial has certain consequences of which we should be fully aware. The term 'nature' itself is highly complex, giving rise to meanings which are not consistent with one another; indeed, this may be one reason why it plays such a central role in our social thinking. This role is particularly crucial in relation to the child. The languages of nature used about children are a major vehicle for our moral concerns.

The moral notions we use when speaking about children can usefully be explored historically. This enables us to put them in a larger perspective by exploring both continuity and change. One possible spin-off of a historical approach is that it can prevent us from taking

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any particular set of attitudes or behaviours as 'natural' or 'normal'. By examining the historical variety of the position of children and of ideas about childhood, and by tracing back some of the steps by which we arrived at our present situation, we can achieve a more dispassionate analysis. Studying children historically is not, however, without its difficulties. What, for example, is the proper object of inquiry? Such a question is less simple-minded than it sounds, since 'child' is not a simple descriptive category. Is age the major criterion or does this shift with class, gender, and historical period? How can a person be a child in some respects (e.g. living at home, being under parental authority) and not in others (e.g. being economically and sexually active)? We might propose that the historian study those deemed children at a specific time and place – a solution which allows for changes in concepts of the child, but not for the problem of simultaneously conflicting attributions. Furthermore, is the study of children different from the study of childhood? To this we must answer yes, since the first implies a study of groups of persons, the second that of a state of being. In the latter case, how can the historian examine such an abstraction? The only way is through those domains which consider children in general: the law, medicine, social policy, and so on. A full history of childhood has to engage with the complexity of the history of ideas.

Yet there is something inherently unsatisfactory about studying the history of childhood without any reference to specific historical personages. It offends deeply held beliefs about authenticity and historical method. Historians persist in searching for the voice of children themselves, in their diaries and autobiographies and in literature written expressly for them.[2] Such a search is based on an illusion about both the nature of childhood and of history. Children, I submit, are constructed in particular social settings; there can be no authentic voice of childhood speaking to us from the past because the adult world dominates that of the child. Thus, while we can study particular children, provided suitable materials exist, and examine general ideas about childhood, we cannot capture children's past experiences or responses in a pure form.

The desire for historical authenticity has also emerged forcefully in relation to women and the working class. The child, the woman, and the worker have all been treated as 'other', that is, as outside mainstream culture and separate from dominant social groups, and hence as not requiring the historical treatment reserved for the adult male members of elites, who become the 'norm'. In reacting against this, radical historians have sought the authentic voice of those who

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not only could not speak for themselves before, but were often assumed to have no tongues. There are now lively debates about the extent to which it is possible to bring women and the working class back through a study of their distinctive behaviours, ideas, and writings. In a similar vein some historians of childhood claim to be giving to the young their own, autonomous history.[3] There are, however, different kinds of otherness involved in these three instances. For example, the otherness of women is based on the depth of gender difference which, however you define it, can readily be seen as constitutive of social relations in general. For the most part we understand men and women, male and female, to be separated by a profound gulf. The peculiarity of the otherness we assign to children is paradoxical in that we have all experienced childhood – hence to make the child other to our adult selves we must split off a part of our past, a piece of ourselves. This accounts for the profound ambivalence which informs our attitudes to children and which is relived when we become parents ourselves. It may be that women and workers have simply spoken with the voices of the dominant discourse, although many historians would deny this. Children, however, have inevitably done so, since there can be no alternative for them. Their passage into being is inexorably a coming into language, a language which is, for the child, a given. There are no special sources available to historians or to others which avoid this trap. The quest for an authentic other is not fulfilled by children – nor, indeed, by any other group. Like children, both women and 'the people' have often been analogised with nature. We remain convinced that for children the comparison is valid, and this makes us imprisoned by it. This long-standing analogy is reinforced by our lively biological sense of the processes of procreation, a fresh consciousness of children – at least when babies – as wonders of nature.

The relationship between children, childhood, and nature has existed at a number of different levels. It is as complex as our ideas about nature itself: the state of childhood may be seen as pure, innocent, or original in the sense of primary; children may be analogised with animals or plants, thereby indicating that they are natural objects available for scientific and medical investigation; children could be valued as aesthetic objects for their beauty and physical perfection – but they could equally well be feared for their instinctual, animal-like natures. Two fundamental points, therefore, arise out of the association between children and nature: First, the polyvalency of nature led to a variety of concepts of childhood, and second, these diverse meanings of childhood were deeply imbued with moral values.

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Children could be used by scholars as a tool for revealing historically shifting meanings of nature. In fact, historians generally use them for different purposes, themselves products of the sentimentalising of children which the association with nature has brought. It is therefore necessary to discuss first how historians have approached these matters before considering some historical material which sheds more direct light on the matter. Throughout we should remember the power of language to shape our ideas. Historians, like everyone else, have worked from commonly held assumptions about children, without attending to the constraints – moral, cultural, and linguistic – on their own frameworks.

Historians and Children

Historians have 'discovered' children and childhood only relatively recently. It was Philippe Ariès who started the trend with his book *Centuries of Childhood*.[4] Although much criticised, it is nonetheless treated by non-historians as a definitive account which establishes certain 'truths' about the subject that are now common knowledge. The volume is a marvellously rich piece of historical writing, drawing on an impressive range of sources, some little used by historians – paintings, architecture, costume, literature, and so on. Ariès advances the thesis that in medieval society children were seen merely as small adults and treated casually. They participated in adult society because no special provisions were made for them. This situation changed, he suggests, over a long period of time, roughly the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, with other major social transformations. The end result was a society which associated children firmly with the domestic sphere and hence with women and with education. Children came to be treated as a particular class of persons, to whom special conditions apply and for whom special provision must therefore be made. A subsidiary thesis concerns parental attitudes towards children. In times of high mortality, children were less valued as individuals, parents were more 'cruel', mourned their children less, and were generally indifferent to them. These attitudes also underwent a radical transformation, so that by the nineteenth century recognisably 'modern' emotions existed. *Centuries of Childhood* has, however, significant limitations. Ariès relies heavily on French materials, with the result that it may be illegitimate to generalise from his account. Furthermore, he simply assumes that there have been dramatic changes in the understanding and so also in the experience of childhood. He

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also takes it for granted that these changes are integral to larger social and cultural transformations.

There can be no doubt that there are serious shortcomings in Ariès's work, but the fundamental question remains how and why his work gripped people's imaginations so forcibly. Certainly it had novelty value; possibly he told them things they wanted to hear about children. Ariès made early modern society an 'other' with respect to children. It could be distanced, put aside, rendered safe by an account which perpetually allows readers to say 'not like us'. The flipside of this is a reinforcement of the readers' own values and attitudes, and a yardstick with which to judge how far society has come. In fact, Ariès implies a somewhat negative interpretation of modern views when he stresses the isolation and lack of sociability of the modern family in general and of women and children in particular. He often romanticised the past to celebrate traditional values. Nonetheless, Ariès may be criticised for treating the present as a norm. Whereas early modern society had no notion of childhood, we now have an elaborate one. Their absence is defined by our presence. This particular aspect of Ariès's argument has prompted much critical comment, largely in relation to the logic of historical argument.[5]

Here I want to stress another aspect of the debate. Arguments among historians of childhood have implicit value systems built into them, and judgement is passed on people long dead. This is most obvious when we look at areas that involve 'cruelty' and violence, for there is abundant historical evidence of gross physical chastisement, economic exploitation, and parental neglect. For us, cruelty to children is such an emotive topic that we lapse all too easily into confusion. Faced with evidence of infanticide, abandonment, murder, and child labour, we are at a loss as to how to construct historical arguments adequate to their explanation.[6] There is a genuine problem of imagination here. Unless scholars are willing to think deeply about violence towards children, which inevitably involves facing their own feelings, they have few options available. They can either deny the validity of the evidence or the interpretative procedures applied to it – for example, by appealing to the 'untypical' nature of infanticide – or they can seek other explanations – such as citing the ubiquity of poverty as a cause of harsh treatment of children. Those who espouse the first position often refer to the constancy of human nature in their support. It is, they imply, 'natural' for parents to love and cherish their children, and denying that this was always the case degrades the members of past societies. They have to produce counter-evidence to show that cruelty and violence were not typical.[7] Those who take up

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the second position generally use a form of economic determinism as their framework. Under the guiding notion of the 'family economy', they point out that shedding children could have been the only way that a family as a whole could survive.[8] Infanticide and abandonment, they argue, were forms of behaviour manifested by those pushed to extremes by hardship and degradation. Similarly, children who were sent to work, often very young, must be understood in the context of a society which took child labour for granted. This began to change only at the end of the eighteenth century, in philanthropic circles, while legislation designed to put a stop to child labour altogether did not come in Britain until the late nineteenth century and was then by no means wholly successful.

Indeed, it is hard to deny that both of these positions have some validity, although they contain refusals to imagine unfamiliar attitudes and forms of behaviour. A few historians have taken a third approach that solves some of these problems. They take the phenomena (infanticide, abandonment, murder, labour, and so on), accept their existence, and then seek to interpret them in terms of the value system of the time. They refuse the moralism implicit in so much historical writing on children. At the same time, they challenge traditional historiography by assuming that uncovering the 'meaning' that has been given to events and experiences in the past is an important and valid historical procedure.[9] It follows directly from this that those who concern themselves with material conditions must consider belief systems as an integral part of historical research. This approach also involves defending the study of 'atypical' behaviour on the grounds that it offers special insights into larger social patterns. In recent years we have come to associate the belief that the normal and the abnormal are closely linked, each existing only in relation to the other, with the work of Michel Foucault.[10] In fact, the idea that the study of deviance – defined relatively, not absolutely – reveals the norm, has existed for some time among sociologists who argue that our understanding of general social patterns may be dramatically sharpened by studying abnormal behaviour. This third approach is open to the complex position of children in past societies, and it requires the historian to be equally alive to a symbolic level.

It was implicit in Ariès's book that stages of life are historically constructed. The idea of there being definable 'ages of man' is an old one; these ages were commonly depicted in Renaissance art. But their function was not to display socially distinct categories, but to act as *memento mori*, reminding people of their own mortality as part of the larger theme of *vanitas*.[11] Historians frequently claim that 'childhood'

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came to be recognised as a separate developmental category first and then, in the nineteenth century, 'adolescence' came into existence. The language we use to speak about such historical processes is crucial. Were these in fact 'inventions' – that is, creations of the human mind – or were they 'discoveries' – that is, recognitions of a state existing outside the realm of ideas? If childhood and adolescence are inventions, then they may be understood in the same terms as other cultural products. If they are discoveries, 'the child' and 'the adolescent' become natural, timeless categories, waiting in the wings of history for just recognition. Discussing the problems inherent in historical language highlights the general difficulties already noted in defining children.

These difficulties are immediately apparent if we ask the simple questions 'What is a child?' and 'What is an adolescent?' There are no clear-cut boundaries here – a child in one culture could be a parent or prostitute at the same age elsewhere. There can be no neat way of defining children simply in terms of their age. Turning to general characteristics shared by all children provides no straightforward solutions either. What do new-borns and nine-year-olds have in common? Our answer to such a question would probably include the following characteristics: dependence upon parents, economic and sexual inactivity, living in the parental home, an absence of legal and political rights. Most of these criteria do not apply to past societies. Furthermore, different parts of a single society treat children and childhood differently. This makes historical generalisation fraught with difficulties, all the more so when present-day assumptions are foisted on the past.

Many past societies had little formal apparatus for dealing with children, hence their position was governed by contingencies. Early modern England, it seems, operated without any clear legal definition of 'child'. Children could be called as witnesses, if, in the opinion of the judge, they seemed able to give testimony. With no legal controls on age of work, a child might be self-sufficient economically at quite a young age. Children of that era who were apprenticed, were, at least in theory, subject to the physical discipline of their masters or mistresses, who sometimes beat them to death.[12]

In a society at any one time, no general definition of childhood exists, although there have been occasions when powerful sectors, such as the law, have provided relatively coherent and systematic accounts of what a child is, particularly in relation to rights. However, far from lapsing into defeatism on account of the difficulty of providing general definitions, we should recognise that it opens up some

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interesting possibilities. Classes, groups, and individuals are constantly negotiating and renegotiating in many different contexts what children are, using perpetual social and conceptual policing which is hard to reconstruct historically.

There is a controversial school of the history of childhood which has not been mentioned so far: psychohistory. Historians using Freudian techniques and theories inevitably place special emphasis on childhood, since psychoanalytic theory accords a privileged place to the child. For many psychohistorians this involves studying individual or collective biographies, using evidence of early experience as a major source. Although this method can help us to understand the childhood of particular individuals, it does not necessarily illuminate the historical aspects of the nature of childhood itself. This is partly because it employs a genetic model, based on biology, to explain a logic of personal development. Stressing the 'evolutionary' processes that parent–child relationships have undergone has resulted in a flat, one-dimensional history. Although it is possible to apply psychoanalytic insights to the history of childhood in a wide variety of ways, one in particular, associated with Lloyd de Mause and the journal he founded, has dominated the field. De Mause argued that societies undergo developmental processes in relation to children just as individuals do and that these can be understood psychoanalytically. Whereas in the past parents were repressive and sadistic, in more recent times they have been increasingly willing to accept the individuality of children. Parents, it seems, are growing up. The maturity of the mid-twentieth century, called the helping mode, was arrived at via five earlier modes which characterised successive historical periods: the infanticidal, abandonment, ambivalent, intrusive, and socialization modes.[13] It is frequently alleged that psychohistory reduces historical phenomena to the psychology of past individuals. It is perfectly possible, however, to apply these same ideas to groups and cognitive structures to uncover both the deep investments we have in seeing children in particular ways and the complex determinants of their lives.

Writing the history of childhood leads us to ask questions about the adequacy of our intellectual tools, calling our entire worldview into question. We must decide, for example, whether children are constructed differently by different societies, whether human nature is trans-historical, and to what extent the material circumstances of a culture guide its theories and practices in relation to children. Curious though it may seem, historians are reluctant not only to raise such matters but even to blend different approaches, as if too much else hangs on their choices. The only way to avoid the trap of a biologism

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